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opening extract from

# A Tale of a Tub

written by

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# *A Tale of a Tub*

## *Section I*

### THE INTRODUCTION

Whoever has an ambition to be heard in a crowd, must press, and squeeze, and thrust, and climb, with indefatigable pains, till he has exalted himself to a certain degree of altitude above them. Now in all assemblies, though you wedge them ever so close, we may observe this peculiar property, that over their heads there is room enough, but how to reach it is the difficult point; it being as hard to get quit of number as of hell;

> — evadere ad auras,
> Hoc opus, hic labor est.*

To this end, the philosopher's way, in all ages, has been by erecting certain edifices in the air: but, whatever practice and reputation these kind of structures have formerly possessed, or may still continue in, not excepting even that of Socrates, when he was suspended in a basket to help contemplation, I think, with due submission, they seem to labour under two inconveniences.

* 'To escape into the upper air,/This is the task, this is the labour.' Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6, 128–9.

First, that the foundations being laid too high, they have been often out of sight, and ever out of hearing. Secondly, that the materials, being very transitory, have suffered much from inclemencies of air, especially in these north-west regions.

Therefore, towards the just performance of this great work, there remain but three methods that I can think of; whereof the wisdom of our ancestors being highly sensible, has, to encourage all aspiring adventurers, thought fit to erect three wooden machines for the use of those orators who desire to talk much without interruption. These are, the pulpit, the ladder, and the stage itinerant. For as to the bar, though it be compounded of the same matter, and designed for the same use, it cannot, however, be well allowed the honour of a fourth, by reason of its level or inferior situation exposing it to perpetual interruption from collaterals. Neither can the bench itself, though raised to a prominency, put in a better claim, whatever its advocates insist on. For, if they please to look into the original design of its erection, and the circumstances or adjuncts subservient to that design, they will soon acknowledge the present practice exactly correspondent to the primitive institution, and both to answer the etymology of the name, which in the Phoenician tongue is a word of great signification, importing, if literally interpreted, the place of sleep; but in common acceptation, a seat well bolstered and cushioned, for the repose of old and gouty limbs: *senes ut in otia tuta recedant.**

* 'So that old men may retire in comfortable leisure'. Horace, *Satires*, I.I.31.

Fortune being indebted to them this part of retaliation, that, as formerly they have long talked while others slept; so now they may sleep as long while others talk.

But if no other argument could occur to exclude the bench and the bar from the list of oratorial machines, it were sufficient that the admission of them would overthrow a number, which I was resolved to establish, whatever argument it might cost me; in imitation of that prudent method observed by many other philosophers and great clerks, whose chief art in division has been to grow fond of some proper mystical number, which their imaginations have rendered sacred, to a degree, that they force common reason to find room for it, in every part of nature; reducing, including, and adjusting every genus and species within that compass, by coupling some against their wills, and banishing others at any rate. Now, among all the rest, the profound number THREE is that which has most employed my sublimest speculations, nor ever without wonderful delight. There is now in the press, and will be published next term, a panegyrical essay of mine upon this number; wherein I have, by most convincing proofs, not only reduced the senses and the elements under its banner, but brought over several deserters from its two great rivals, SEVEN and NINE; the two climacterics.

Now, the first of these oratorial machines, in place as well as dignity, is the pulpit. Of pulpits there are in this island several sorts; but I esteem only that made of timber from the *sylva Caledonia*, which agrees very well with our climate. If it be upon its decay, it is the better both for conveyance of sound, and for other reasons to

be mentioned by-and-by. The degree of perfection in shape and size I take to consist in being extremely narrow, with little ornament; and, best of all, without cover (for, by ancient rule, it ought to be the only uncovered vessel in every assembly, where it is rightfully used), by which means, from its near resemblance to a pillory, it will ever have a mighty influence on human ears.

Of ladders I need say nothing: it is observed by foreigners themselves, to the honour of our country, that we excel all nations in our practice and understanding of this machine. The ascending orators do not only oblige their audience in the agreeable delivery, but the whole world in the early publication of their speeches; which I look upon as the choicest treasury of our British eloquence, and whereof, I am informed, that worthy citizen and bookseller, Mr John Dunton, hath made a faithful and painful collection, which he shortly designs to publish, in twelve volumes in folio, illustrated with copperplates. A work highly useful and curious, and altogether worthy of such a hand.

The last engine of orators is the stage itinerant, erected with much sagacity, *sub Jove pluvio, in triviis et quadriviis.** It is the great seminary of the two former, and its orators are sometimes preferred to the one, and sometimes to the other, in proportion to their deservings; there being a strict and perpetual intercourse between all three.

From this accurate deduction it is manifest, that for obtaining attention in public there is of necessity required a superior position of place. But, although this point be

* 'under the very heavens, at the junctions and crossroads'.

generally granted, yet the cause is little agreed in; and it seems to me that very few philosophers have fallen into a true, natural solution of this phenomenon. The deepest account, and the most fairly digested of any I have yet met with, is this; that air being a heavy body, and therefore, according to the system of Epicurus, continually descending, must needs be more so when loaded and pressed down by words; which are also bodies of much weight and gravity, as it is manifest from those deep impressions they make and leave upon us; and therefore must be delivered from a due altitude, or else they will neither carry a good aim, nor fall down with a sufficient force.

> Corpoream quoque enim vocem constare fatendum est,
> Et sonitum, quoniam possunt impellere sensus.*

And I am the readier to favour this conjecture, from a common observation, that in the several assemblies of these orators nature itself has instructed the hearers to stand with their mouths open, and erected parallel to the horizon, so as they may be intersected by a perpendicular line from the zenith to the centre of the earth. In which position, if the audience be well compact, every one carries home a share, and little or nothing is lost.

I confess there is something yet more refined, in the contrivance and structure of our modern theatres. For,

* 'And we must agree that voice too is physical/Since it can incite the senses.' Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 4.526–7.

first, the pit is sunk below the stage, with due regard to the institution above deduced; that, whatever weighty matter shall be delivered thence, whether it be lead or gold, may fall plump into the jaws of certain critics, as I think they are called, which stand ready opened to devour them. Then, the boxes are built round, and raised to a level with the scene, in deference to the ladies; because, that large portion of wit, laid out in raising pruriences and protuberances, is observed to run much upon a line, and ever in a circle. The whining passions, and little starved conceits, are gently wafted up by their own extreme levity, to the middle region, and there fix and are frozen by the frigid understandings of the inhabitants. Bombastry and buffoonery, by nature lofty and light, soar highest of all, and would be lost in the roof, if the prudent architect had not, with much foresight, contrived for them a fourth place, called the twelve-penny gallery, and there planted a suitable colony, who greedily intercept them in their passage.

Now this physico-logical scheme of oratorial receptacles or machines contains a great mystery; being a type, a sign, an emblem, a shadow, a symbol, bearing analogy to the spacious commonwealth of writers, and to those methods by which they must exalt themselves to a certain eminency above the inferior world. By the pulpit are adumbrated the writings of our modern saints in Great Britain, as they have spiritualised and refined them, from the dross and grossness of sense and human reason. The matter, as we have said, is of rotten wood; and that upon two considerations; because it is the quality of rotten wood to give light in the dark: and

secondly, because its cavities are full of worms; which is a type with a pair of handles, having a respect to the two principal qualifications of the orator, and the two different fates attending upon his works.

The ladder is an adequate symbol of *faction* and of poetry, to both of which so noble a number of authors are indebted for their fame. Of faction, because.* . . . *Hiatus in MS* . . . Of *poetry*, because its orators do *perorare* with a song; and because, climbing up by slow degrees, fate is sure to turn them off before they can reach within many steps of the top: and because it is a preferment attained by transferring of propriety, and a confounding of *meum* and *tuum*.

Under the stage itinerant are couched those productions designed for the pleasure and delight of mortal man; such as, Six-penny-worth of Wit, Westminster Drolleries, Delightful Tales, Complete Jesters, and the like; by which the writers of and for *Grub-street* have in these latter ages so nobly triumphed over Time; have clipped his wings, pared his nails, filed his teeth, turned back his hour-glass, blunted his scythe, and drawn the hobnails out of his shoes. It is under this class I have presumed to list my present treatise, being just come from having the honour conferred upon me to be adopted a member of that illustrious fraternity.

Now, I am not unaware how the productions of the Grub-street brotherhood have of late years fallen under many prejudices, nor how it has been the perpetual

*A pretended defect in the manuscript is a favourite device with Swift.

employment of two junior start-up societies to ridicule them and their authors, as unworthy their established post in the commonwealth of wit and learning. Their own consciences will easily inform them whom I mean; nor has the world been so negligent a looker-on as not to observe the continual efforts made by the societies of Gresham* and of Will's† to edify a name and reputation upon the ruin of OURS. And this is yet a more feeling grief to us, upon the regards of tenderness as well as of justice, when we reflect on their proceedings not only as unjust, but as ungrateful, undutiful, and unnatural. For how can it be forgot by the world or themselves, to say nothing of our own records, which are full and clear in the point, that they both are seminaries not only of our planting, but our watering too? I am informed, our two rivals have lately made an offer to enter into the lists with united forces, and challenge us to a comparison of books, both as to weight and number. In return to which, with license from our president, I humbly offer two answers: first, we say, the proposal is like that which Archimedes made upon a smaller affair, including an impossibility in the practice; for where can they find scales of capacity enough for the first; or an arithmetician of capacity enough for the second? Secondly, we are ready to accept the challenge; but with this condition, that a third indifferent person be assigned, to whose impartial judgment it should be left to decide which society each book, treatise, or pamphlet do most prop-

* The Royal Society met at Gresham College.
† Will's coffee-house, in Covent Garden.

erly belong to. This point, God knows, is very far from being fixed at present; for we are ready to produce a catalogue of some thousands, which in all common justice ought to be entitled to our fraternity, but by the revolted and new-fangled writers, most perfidiously ascribed to the others. Upon all which, we think it very unbecoming our prudence that the determination should be remitted to the authors themselves; when our adversaries, by briguing and caballing, have caused so universal a defection from us, that the greatest part of our society has already deserted to them, and our nearest friends begin to stand aloof, as if they were half ashamed to own us.

This is the utmost I am authorised to say upon so ungrateful and melancholy a subject; because we are extremely unwilling to inflame a controversy whose continuance may be so fatal to the interests of us all, desiring much rather that things be amicably composed; and we shall so far advance on our side as to be ready to receive the two prodigals with open arms whenever they shall think fit to return from their husks and their harlots; which, I think, from the present course of their studies, they most properly may be said to be engaged in; and, like an indulgent parent, continue to them our affection and our blessing.